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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Peer Outreach Service Team (POST), a peer multi-service, student support system organization operating in the Fort Lee schools in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The goals of the POST program are described as reducing numbers of school dropouts as well as levels of negative behavior, chemical dependency, teenage depression, and academic underachievement in the district's school-age population. The 10 distinct service activities of the program, all designed to promote self-awareness, improved personal competence, and self-directed behavior, are briefly described: (1) core awareness sessions; (2) smooth transitions; (3) welcome program; (4) one-to-one; (5) peer intervention network; (6) partners against scapegoating; (7) planning leisure activities now; (8) human relations support to students with special needs; (9) kids-r-safe; and (10) consultation services. Training of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students to serve as peer leaders is discussed and program evaluation is explained. The paper concludes with a brief description of the current status of the POST program. (NB)

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FORT LEE'S COMPREHENSIVE PEER OUTREACH PROGRAM

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Peer Outreach Service Team (POST) is a peer multi-service, student support system organization operating in the Fort Lee Schools. It is a cooperative effort continuously evolving through the support and efforts of the Superintendent, Child Study Team Administrator, coordinator and student participants. Each year tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade volunteers at Fort Lee High School give up their free time in order to extend services to a variety of students. The program is divided into ten distinct service activities, all of which promote self-awareness, improved personal competence, and self-directed behavior. Thus far POST services have reached over 1000 Fort Lee students. POST'S ambitious mission is to reduce negative behavior, school drop-outs, chemical dependency, teenage depression, and academic underachievement in the district's school-age population. It also impacts other schools and agencies throughout the state by training students and extending programs to other populations. The program design developed from an extensive study of peer groups and the dynamics of their social networks. POST continued to grow each year as students, teachers and special services personnel collaborated to identify and respond to the critical issues in the schools and society. It is now part of a broader based school and community program which serves a broad population with student volunteers.

Currently, POST has turned its focus to prevention of adolescent negative behavior to reverse the alarming increase in chemical dependency. A recent national survey indicates a serious acceleration of alcohol, cigarette and substance abuse by high school students (85% of students in grades 10 through 12 using alcohol and drugs). The alarming acceleration of alcohol and drug abuse in our nation's youth has scarcely left any American community untouched. Teenage problem behaviors are strongly linked to illicit substance abuse (Braucht, 1982). The problems are not isolated but occur through pressure from the peer group network (Frank et al, 1985).

Unfortunately traditional approaches to prevention provided by educational school-based programs have been minimally effective in reducing substance use behaviors (Barnes, 1984).The major force of influence lies in the peer group social system. Research has shown that positive peer role models can serve as powerful agents in changing behavior (Candler, 197). The advantage of using trained peer leaders to promote self-awareness and problem solving skills in younger students is also substantiated in the literature (Buono and Smith, 1980).

POST utilizes the adolescent peer group as a positive socializing force to promote productive self-management in a variety of student populations. The following descriptions represent a composite overview of services:

1. CORE AWARENESS SESSIONS - Four to six drug and alcohol information sessions conducted by peer leaders serve as the centerpiece for

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disseminating important facts about alcohol and drug use so that students will be able to say no to their use. Role-playing and factual presentations are the main vehicles through which the message is given. Family life classes, health classes, and self-contained classes serve as the settings.

2. SMOOTH TRANSITIONS - Juniors and seniors are trained to guide incoming ninth grade students to facilitate academic and personal adjustment. Older students serve as positive role models to these freshmen through the first months in their new high school environment. The partnerships are intensified through a one day Wilderness Expedition Program at th Wildcat Mountain provided by Bergen County Family Guidance. Student partners are put through a series of problem-solving activities and physical hurdles which serve as vehicles for overcoming adversity in a new environment. After a few months at the high school, when ninth graders find their own activities and friends, they no longer need the intensive guidance of their peer helpers.

3. WELCOME PROGRAM - Trained juniors and seniors guide students who enter the Fort Lee Schools from other districts. The focus of this program is on social, emotional, and academic adjustment to this novel educational setting. The program is particularly helpful to foreign students who enter Fort Lee as their first formal educational experience in America. POST students assist these newcomers to find friends, select co-curricular activities, and achieve better educational adjustment. This arrangement is short lived and usually dissipates after the first two or three months of successful adjustment.

4. ONE-TO-ONE - In this program, trained high school students combine support and tutoring approaches to assist younger middle school and elementary underachievers through individual meetings held during lunch or other designated periods once a week. This program is designed to prevent school failure, truancy, substance abuse, and potential dropouts.

5. PEER INTERVENTION NETWORK (PIN) - This program establishes an ongoing support group for middle school students who are having difficulty with behavior and poor grades. Students form partnerships to identify and solve their problems. Each student has a peer "shadow" to assist him/her. Groups meet weekly, before, during, and/or after school as necessary. When members improve academic achievement, they automatically elevate their group status as they become experts.

6. PARTNERS AGAINST SCAPEGOATING (PAS) - In this program two peer leaders enter middle school family life and health classes to lead four sessions of structured experiences designed to sensitize students to the adverse effects of verbal assaults, degradation, and stereotyping behavior. High school partners start out with a harsh introduction, awakening students to the scapegoating experience. They end by teaching the students how to respect each others' needs. Coping skills to resist verbal abuse are also promoted.

7. PLANNING LEISURE ACTIVITIES NOW (PLAN) - Trained high school students who have coped with their own independent time problems lead groups of younger students in grades 6 through 8 to help them in their struggles with loneliness and time management They learn to cope with anxiety

produced by the parents who work and are not available after school. Juniors and seniors lead ten sessions of structured experiences which help develop alternative uses of open time. All sessions are voluntary and held during lunch.

8. HUMAN RELATION SUPPORT TO STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS - In this program POST students provide structured experiences to eighth grade special classes at the middle school. These sessions help to promote self-awareness, self-esteem, and positive social interaction skills. The eighth grade students learn about the high school from the high school POST students who prepare them for their forthcoming ninth grade experience.

9. KIDS-R-SAFE - Peer leaders conduct workshops on child safety and tactics to avoid contact with harmful strangers. High School students lead workshops with first and second grade students which initiate discrimination skills necessary to determine friendly strangers from hostile strangers. Mini-dramas are role played by student leaders to illustrate safety strategies to avoid being kidnapped or abused. The first and second graders are also cautioned against accepting any food or other substance from strangers. The program is presented from a positive perspective in an upbeat fashion, despite its weighty underlying themes.

10. CONSULTATION SERVICES - POST extends a wide variety of outreach services to professional organizations, county agencies and other school districts. POST students have trained other high school peer leaders in helping skills and Partners Against Scapegoating Program (PAS), which they have carried out in their own schools. POST students have led discussion groups at The Peer Leaders Advisors Network Workshop, attended by over two hundred and fifty students from New Jersey districts. POST leaders and advisors have presented POST to professional organizations and conferences.

TRAINING:

POST'S peer leaders attend a one semester leadership development course at Fort Lee High School, targeted towards developing communication skills, defining helping roles, and promoting realistic self-appraisal. POST volunteers are carefully screened through interviews and simulations of typical problem situations. They must be in good academic standing, have at least two periods per day available for service and be highly motivated.

Additional training sessions teach various communication skills, rapport building, story telling to promote positive change, and extensive tutoring skills development. Trainees and advisors carefully monitor the progress of peer leaders as they pass through three stages of training. They are briefed on what behaviors trigger the need for referrals to professionals. Dr. Kehayan supervises assistant trainers and advisors who are second year POST students and teachers. They volunteer to assist in monitoring specific programs and peer leaders throughout the academic year.

EVALUATION:

Careful scrutiny and evaluation through standardized instruments as well as observational assessments have shown significant positive impact on

both helpers and receiving students. Research on helper effectiveness has shown that high school peer leaders gain considerable knowledge of interpersonal behavior and communication skills as well as heightened self-esteem and social commitment.

The receiving students have improved their attendance, grades, self-esteem, and have developed positive co-curricular positive activities and outlets. Surveys completed by them have expressed receptiveness and positive responses to their helpers.

CURRENT STATUS

One of the most remarkable aspects of this program is that it is a completely voluntary experience. Each year POST leaders develop new program concepts responsive to significant issues affecting young people. The program has been shown to be cost effective, beneficial to both peer leaders and receiving students, and capable of utilizing peer influence as a major force impacting constructive behavior change amongst youth.

The benefits of this approach appear to account for its growing popularity throughout the nation. POST is an ever-changing peer assistance alternative which is under constant self-scrutiny always flexible in its outlook. POST'S transactions encompass the need for a cooperative, peaceful coexistence; prevention of child abduction through protective strategies, and improvement of student competence in decision-making and problem-solving. POST utilizes the natural powerful force of the peer system to bring about positive change through extraordinary role models. It is on the cutting edge of a trend which is obviously a growing and critical part of our educational mission.

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